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ABSTRACT

Based on large-scale surveys of high school seniors in the classes of 1975 through 1984, this paper presents findings which have a bearing on the quality of life of young people. Most seniors planned and hoped for marriage, children, and material well-being; however, the last few graduating classes showed increased concern about attaining those goals, and thus placed growing emphasis on job security, status, and income. At a global level, concerns about the threat of nuclear war have increased substantially from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s; the predominant view among young people appears to be that world conditions will not improve during the next few years. Analyses of drug use showed growing use of marijuana from 1975 through 1979, followed by a decline during the past few years. The decline accompanied increasing proportions of respondents reporting the belief that regular use of marijuana carries great risks of harm. (Author/TE)

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Some Recent Trends in the Aspirations, Concerns, and Behaviors of American Young People*

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Abstract

Based on large-scale surveys of high school seniors in the classes of 1975 through 1984, we present a number of findings which have a bearing on the quality of life of young people. Most seniors plan and hope for marriage, children, and material well-being; however, the last few graduating classes evidence increased concern about attaining those goals, and thus place growing emphasis on job security, status, and income. At a global level, concerns about the threat of nuclear war have increased substantially from the mid-seventies to the early eighties, and the predominant view among young people is that world conditions will not improve during the next few years. Analyses of drug use showed growing use of marijuana from 1975 through 1979, followed by a decline during the past few years. The decline was accompanied by increasing proportions believing that regular use of marijuana carries great risks of harm.

Introduction

"Monitoring the Future" is an ongoing study of youth and young adults. Its primary purpose is to monitor change and, to the extent possible, to sort out the nature of change. In the present paper we report some changes—and also some non-changes—which have much to do with the quality of life of youth. Among the subjects to be reviewed are the general life goals of today's youth; their plans in relation to marriage, parenthood, and jobs; their expectations and worries about the future; and finally their experiences with drug, alcohol, and cigarette use.

Research Design

The Monitoring the Future project employs what has been termed a cohort-sequential research design (Schaie, 1965) consisting of a series of annual, nationwide questionnaire surveys of seniors in high schools, plus annual follow-up surveys mailed to subsets of each sample during the years following graduation. The research design has been described extensively elsewhere (especially in Bachman and Johnston, 1978; see also Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley, 1980a, 1980b, 1981, 1984; Johnston, Bachman, and O'Malley, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1982; and other publications cited herein).

The annual surveys of seniors began with the class of 1975, and involve samples of about 17,000 each year, located in about 130 high schools. Five different questionnaire forms are used, with somewhat more than three thousand seniors responding to each. The questionnaires are confidential, self-administered in classroom settings, and deal with a broad range of plans, values, attitudes, and behaviors. The samples are large and accurate enough, and the procedures are consistent enough from year to year, so that we can detect fairly subtle trends with a good deal of confidence.

Goals and Values of Today's Youth

Any examination of young people in the present or the recent past almost inevitably invites a comparison with youth in the more turbulent late sixties and early seventies. Compared with young people during that earlier time, today's youth seem quieter and less given to excesses in their political views and actions.

Young people today, in contrast with those a decade or so earlier, are not faced with such crises as the Vietnam war and the draft. Thus, they are freer to concentrate on the more immediate issues in their personal lives—their own hopes and plans. And, in large measure, those hopes and plans fit the conventional view of the "American dream" of marriage, children, a good and secure job, an attractive home, and a wide range of other material advantages.

One of our survey questions presents a list of 14 life goals, and asks seniors to rate their importance. Table 1 shows the five that are given the highest ratings. A good marriage and family life leads the list, with 67 percent of the males in the class of 1984 and 79 percent of the females rating them "extremely important." "Finding steady work" has, not surprisingly, grown in importance over the past few years; the same can be said of "being successful in my work." "Strong friendships" have consistently ranked high in

importance, with slightly higher ratings among females. The largest sex difference to appear in this set of questions involves the importance of "finding purpose and meaning in my life," which was consistently rated extremely important by about 15-20 percent more of the women than the men.

Marriage and Parenthood

One of the things which most seniors expect will provide purpose and meaning in their lives is marriage and parenthood. In the long run, the great majority of all seniors expect to get married, and most rate it "very likely" that they will stay married to the same person for life. Four out of five seniors, both male and female, consider it at least "fairly likely" that they will want to have children; however, many report having given the matter little or no thought thus far. Among females just over half said they had thought "a lot" about whether to have children, and how many; among males the figure is just over one quarter.

Our questionnaires include a number of items about how seniors would like to divide up family responsibilities between husband and wife if they were married. The most preferred arrangement is to have husbands and wives take equal responsibility for the day-to-day care of children; nevertheless, there is also a clear preference that mothers of pre-school children not be employed full-time. In fact, the most preferred arrangement is that mothers of pre-school children not be employed outside the home at all. On the other hand, it is the strong preference of both males and females that fathers of pre-school children work full-time. When there are no children, then the most preferred arrangement for the wife is full-time employment, although part-time employment or no outside employment for the wife are acceptable to significant proportions of females and larger proportions of males. The preferences for husbands, however, remain consistent and strong: most arrangements involving less than full-time employment by the husband are rated unacceptable by majorities of both males and females. This means, of course, that the male sex role is more narrowly circumscribed than the female one, at least when it comes to majority views about any lifestyle involving less than full-time employment. (For an extensive reporting of Monitoring the Future data on sex-role attitudes and preferences, see Herzog and Bachman 1982.)

In sum, when it comes to marriage and parenthood, today's young people do not exhibit any radical break with the past, judging by their own plans and preferences. In large proportions they prefer marriage, they want children, and they seem willing to make accommodations to the needs of those children.

Jobs

What about the kinds of jobs seniors hope to attain? Table 2 shows importance ratings for a variety of job characteristics. The largest majorities of both males and females give the top rating ("very important") to having a job that is "interesting to do," and the next highest rated job characteristic involves making use of the individual's own skills and abilities. The high ratings of these two characteristics have remained relatively constant since 1976. The importance of advancement, prestige, and income have all increased in recent years, fully consistent with the widespread view that young people are becoming more concerned about their own individual outcomes, perhaps partly in reaction to the difficult job market which faces them. (We also have found that working for a large corporation has been growing increasingly popular as a goal among high school seniors.)

TABLE 1

Important Things in Life
(Percent Rating Extremely Important, Classes of 1976-1984)

	Males									Females								
	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
A good marriage and family life . . .	66	69	70	73	70	71	69	69	67	80	78	80	82	82	82	83	82	79
Finding steady work	66	65	67	68	68	69	73	74	73	61	58	62	63	62	65	70	73	71
Being successful in my work	53	55	58	60	55	58	61	60	59	52	53	54	57	55	57	60	61	59
Strong friendships	57	58	63	62	59	60	62	60	61	60	62	65	65	67	65	66	65	64
Finding purpose and meaning in my life	54	53	57	55	54	52	51	52	48	75	72	74	73	68	72	71	72	67

As Table 2 indicates, ratings of job characteristics are fairly similar between the sexes; males and females want much the same sort of things from their jobs. Within the larger context of similarity, there are some discernible differences; relative to males, females rate the chance to make friends and being worthwhile to society as more important, and the chance to earn a good deal of money as less important.

Most high school seniors have already had at least some amount of first-hand experience in the world of work. Three out of four (75%) report some job income during the average school week, and for many it exceeds fifty dollars a week (true of 41 percent of males and 35 percent of females in the class of 1984). The typical part-time job for high school seniors involves 16-20 hours per week; however, about one in ten seniors works more than thirty hours a week, and another two in ten work 21-30 hours. Our data on incomes of high school seniors confirm what many observers have noted and many merchandisers have turned to advantage: teenagers have a good deal of money at their disposal, much of it available for what economists call "discretionary spending." (Another term for it is "premature affluence," since many high school students have budgets for luxury items which they may not be able to sustain later on when earnings will have to cover such non-luxury items as food and rent.)

Views of the Future

Some of the problems facing the nation are listed in Table 3, along with the percentages of seniors who indicated that they worry "often" about them (which was the highest response possible on a four-point rating scale). Heading the list in overall importance is crime and violence; half or more of the females and a third or more of the males report worrying often about these problems. Some other problems, such as population growth and pollution, seem a bit more under control—or at least they are less in the forefront of seniors' concerns these days compared with 1975. Concerns about hunger and poverty are down slightly since 1975-1976. Concerns about energy shortages peaked in 1979-80, but dropped to very low levels by 1984. Worries about economic problems have been quite variable; between 1975 and 1978, such concerns declined from over 30% of all seniors to 21%; between 1978 and 1980, concerns rose again to over 30%; and concerns dropped again between 1983 and 1984. One of the most dramatic changes shown in Table 3 is the large rise in percentages of seniors who worry often about the chance of nuclear war.

The Threat of War

In addition to the data shown in Table 3, several other items in the Monitoring the Future questionnaires also suggest that nuclear war is a genuine concern for young people. Two such items are part of a series using an agree-disagree format. The first states: "My guess is that this country will be caught up in a major world upheaval in the next ten years." More than one-third (37 percent) of the seniors in 1984 indicated that they "Agree" or "Mostly agree" with that statement, another third (35 percent) have mixed views, and just over one quarter (28 percent) "Disagree" or "Mostly disagree." That rather depressing item is followed immediately by one a great deal stronger: "Nuclear or biological annihilation will probably be the fate of all mankind, within my lifetime." The class of 1984 split on this item also, with three out of ten on the agreement side (29 percent), four out of ten in disagreement (39 percent), and the rest (31 percent) choosing the "Neither" category. Back in 1975 the disagreers outnumbered the agreers by almost two-to-one (43 percent versus 22 percent). It is worth noting that the question sequence does not end with the annihilation item; the last statement in the series is upbeat: "The

TABLE 2

Important Things in a Job
(Percent Rating Very Important, Classes of 1976-1984)

	Males									Females								
	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
Interesting to do . .	84	88	87	88	85	85	85	86	86	92	91	91	91	91	91	91	89	89
Uses skills and abilities	65	70	69	71	68	70	68	69	66	76	78	74	73	76	76	76	75	76
Predictable, secure future	62	64	66	65	64	63	66	64	66	62	62	62	64	65	66	66	67	65
Good chances for advancement	59	65	67	64	65	67	66	65	67	54	59	59	65	61	66	65	65	64
See results of what you do	55	55	58	58	54	58	56	54	53	61	63	63	62	64	64	62	61	61
Chance to earn a good deal of money .	54	54	56	60	58	59	61	61	61	40	43	44	47	50	52	52	51	54
Chance to make friends	47	50	47	52	47	48	46	44	45	61	63	61	62	59	59	57	57	58
Worthwhile to society	39	40	36	39	36	40	37	39	36	50	51	50	50	51	49	50	51	47
A job most people look up to and respect . .	32	35	33	35	36	37	36	36	38	36	37	39	38	39	42	43	41	43
High status, prestige	22	24	24	28	26	29	30	29	29	18	21	23	23	24	28	30	27	29

TABLE 3

Problems Facing the Nation

(Percent Who Worry Often, Classes of 1975-1984)

	Males										Females									
	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
Of all the problems facing the nation today, how often do you worry about each of the following?																				
Chance of nuclear war	7	13	18	19	23	30	27	31	28	29	8	8	12	11	18	24	20	30	23	30
Population growth . .	18	14	12	13	10	8	9	7	6	4	21	24	20	15	14	10	10	8	9	6
Crime and violence .	43	43	39	38	35	29	40	37	34	30	63	65	67	61	55	49	67	59	57	52
Pollution	38	35	36	32	26	24	24	19	16	16	36	37	35	29	28	21	21	18	16	13
Energy shortages . .	39	31	42	32	49	51	40	23	15	12	33	26	38	31	44	47	33	17	12	7
Race relations . . .	15	17	16	16	14	12	15	16	16	14	23	24	25	24	19	17	22	20	20	18
Hunger and poverty .	18	16	13	11	9	11	13	11	12	13	36	31	27	29	22	24	28	27	29	26
Economic problems . .	32	26	20	20	25	36	33	28	31	23	32	24	22	17	23	30	31	29	30	22
Drug abuse	23	24	23	24	22	20	25	26	23	22	38	40	39	37	38	37	42	41	41	40

human race has come through tough times before, and will do so again." About two-thirds of the seniors are on the agreement side of this item, and only one in ten disagrees—a pattern which has held fairly constant. If that appears inconsistent with the gloomy responses to the preceding items, that is probably a fair assessment. We suspect, however, that the same questionnaire sequence administered to a cross-section of adults would produce similar inconsistencies; the threat of nuclear war is clearly there, but most people would rather think about and emphasize the positive.

Drug Use

While the risk of nuclear war involves forces which most seniors would view as largely beyond their control, another problem area listed in Table 3 lies much closer to home—the problem of drug abuse. Although abuse turns out to be a slippery concept to define, there is no doubt that use of both licit and illicit drugs by young people rose dramatically during the seventies, so that in recent years the majority of seniors have used marijuana and many have had other experiences of illicit drug use. Moreover, half of the males and about thirty percent of the females in each of the recent classes of seniors have reported taking five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion during the two weeks preceding the survey. Drug use and related attitudes are central topics in the Monitoring the Future project, and data in this area have been analyzed fairly extensively. We summarize some of the key findings here, both because they are an important aspect in the quality of life of many young people, and also because they illustrate some of the ways in which the Monitoring the Future design can be employed to analyze change.

Trends in Use by Seniors

Some rather straightforward trend data are provided by the comparisons of the senior classes of 1975 through 1984, as shown in Figure 1. The left side of the figure shows that daily marijuana use reached its highest level among seniors in the classes of 1978 and 1979. Data on monthly use (not shown) confirm that these were the peak years for marijuana use. The figure also shows that daily use of a half pack or more of cigarettes reached its peak several years earlier, and has declined substantially since then.

Figure 2 shows what is surely a key reason for the recent decline in marijuana use among seniors. In increasing proportions they are coming to perceive that there are great risks of harm involved in regular use of marijuana—in 1983 and 1984, such use was seen to be even riskier than smoking a pack of cigarettes daily.

Period, Age, and Cohort Effects

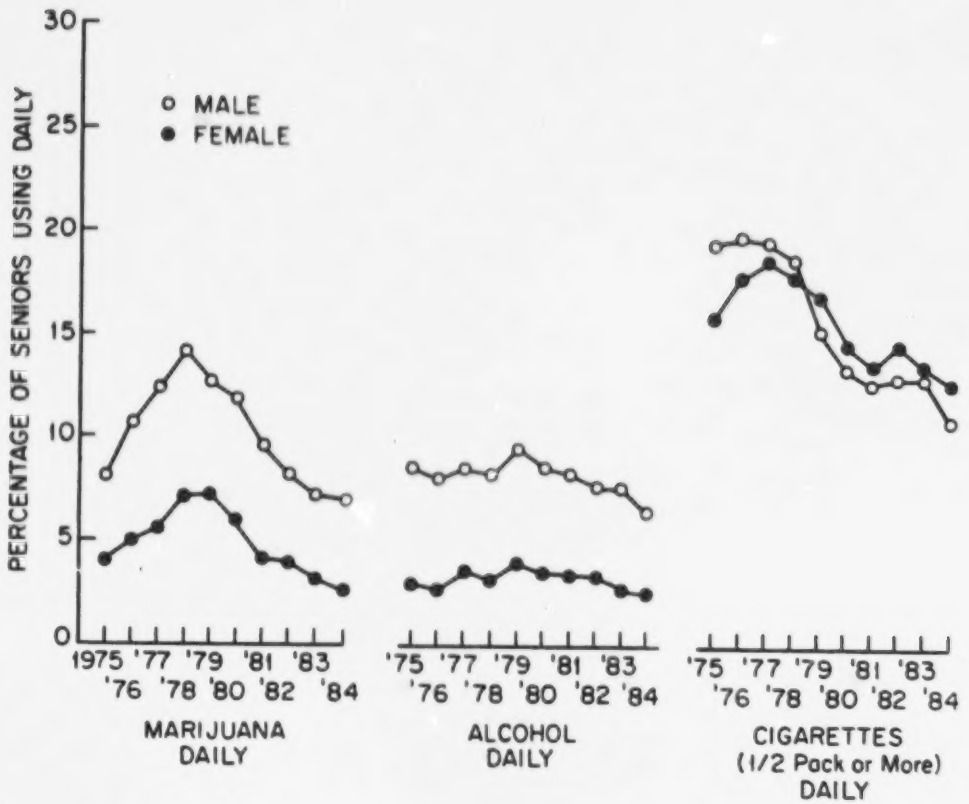
The reporting of trends in drug use among high school seniors has been a primary contribution of the Monitoring the Future study as a source of social indicator data (see Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman, 1984, for a recent example). However, the trends based on high school seniors leave some questions unanswered as to the nature of the changes underlying the trends. The follow-up component of the study is designed to help answer such questions.

Consider the rapid rise and then substantial decline in marijuana use. We can ask whether these shifts from one senior class to another represent secular trends (which would show up in much the same way across a broader band of ages—say 15 to 25) or cohort differences (distinctions between those in the classes of, say, 1975 and 1978 which

FIGURE 1

Trends in Thirty-Day Prevalence of Daily Use of

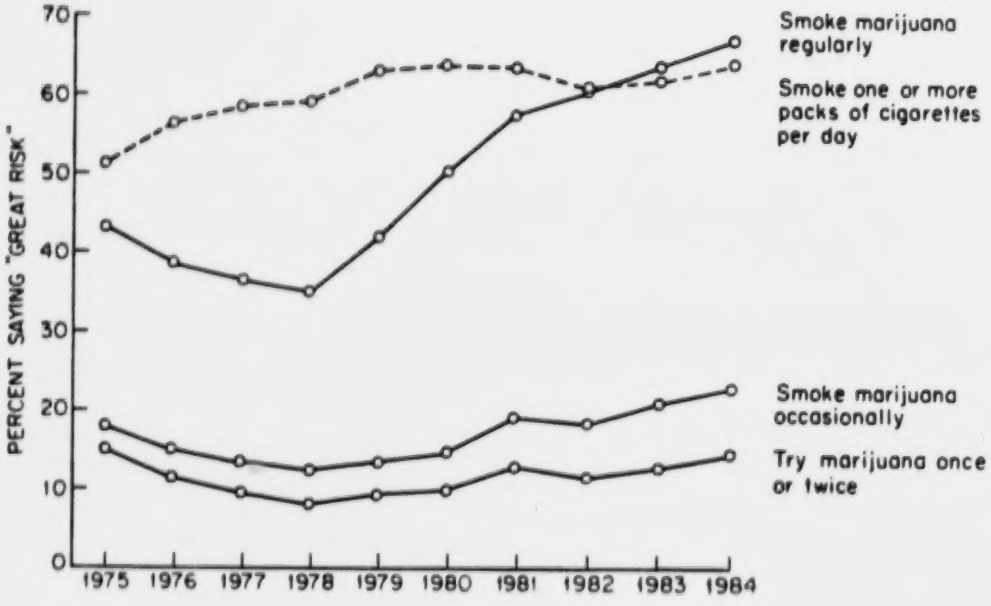
Marijuana, Alcohol, and Cigarettes by Sex



Note: Daily use for alcohol and marijuana is defined as use on 20 or more occasions in the past thirty days. Daily use of cigarettes is defined as smoking a half-pack or more per day in the past thirty days.

FIGURE 2

Trends in Perceived Harmfulness: Marijuana and Cigarettes



will continue for some years to come). The data in Figure 3 indicate rather clearly that the differences observed among senior year samples reflect a secular trend or period effect—marijuana use hit its peak in the late seventies not only for those who were high school seniors but also for those in their very late teens and early twenties. (For a more detailed reporting of our efforts to differentiate period, age, and cohort effects on substance use among youth, as well as a discussion of some of the problems and complexities involved, see O'Malley, Bachman, and Johnston, 1983, 1984.)

Stability and Change in Use after High School

Another application of the follow-up data from the Monitoring the Future project takes advantage of the panel design—the fact that the same individuals are surveyed in both base-year and follow-ups. Relatively little longitudinal research exists on the progression of drug-using behaviors through the early adult years, a period during which young people make a number of important transitions into new social environments and experiences.

One question of considerable importance is the extent to which drug-using behaviors remain relatively stable from year to year. Our panel analyses indicate quite a strong correlation between senior year use of a drug and use of that same drug during the first several years after high school. After adjustments for measurement reliability, we estimate annual stabilities at .9 or higher for cigarette use and .8 or higher for use of alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs. This means that the single most important predictor of post-high school drug use is use during high school. We do not interpret the strong correlation between earlier and later drug use as indicating simply that senior year drug use causes drug use several years later. Rather, we recognize that many of the factors which influence drug use—factors such as religious commitment, commitment to education, peer and family pressures, personal attitudes about drugs, and other aspects of lifestyle—all have a certain stability themselves. Thus, in a sense, our measures of senior year drug use are convenient proxies for a wide array of more fundamental (and relatively stable) causes of drug use, of which we have measured and analyzed only a portion. (For more extensive treatments of stability in drug use, and methods of estimation, see Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston, 1981, 1984, and O'Malley, Bachman, and Johnston, 1983.)

Impacts of Post-High School Experiences

Given that much of drug use after high school is predictable from senior year drug use, it remains important to understand those shifts in use which may be attributable to post-high school experiences. We have examined three interrelated dimensions of experience: education, occupation, and living arrangements. It would have been unwise to examine any one of these dimensions in isolation, because they are so closely interconnected. For example, those employed in full-time jobs are unlikely also to be full-time students. As another example, recent high school graduates who are primarily college students are less likely to be married and living with a spouse, but also less likely to be living with parents, than those who are employed full-time and not going to college. When we took account of such overlaps, our analyses revealed little direct impact attributable to post-high school educational and occupational experiences. On the other hand, living arrangements did seem to produce clear, consistent, and readily interpretable shifts in drug use, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4 presents data for marijuana use, showing base-year and follow-up (one,

FIGURE 3

Marijuana: Daily Prevalence

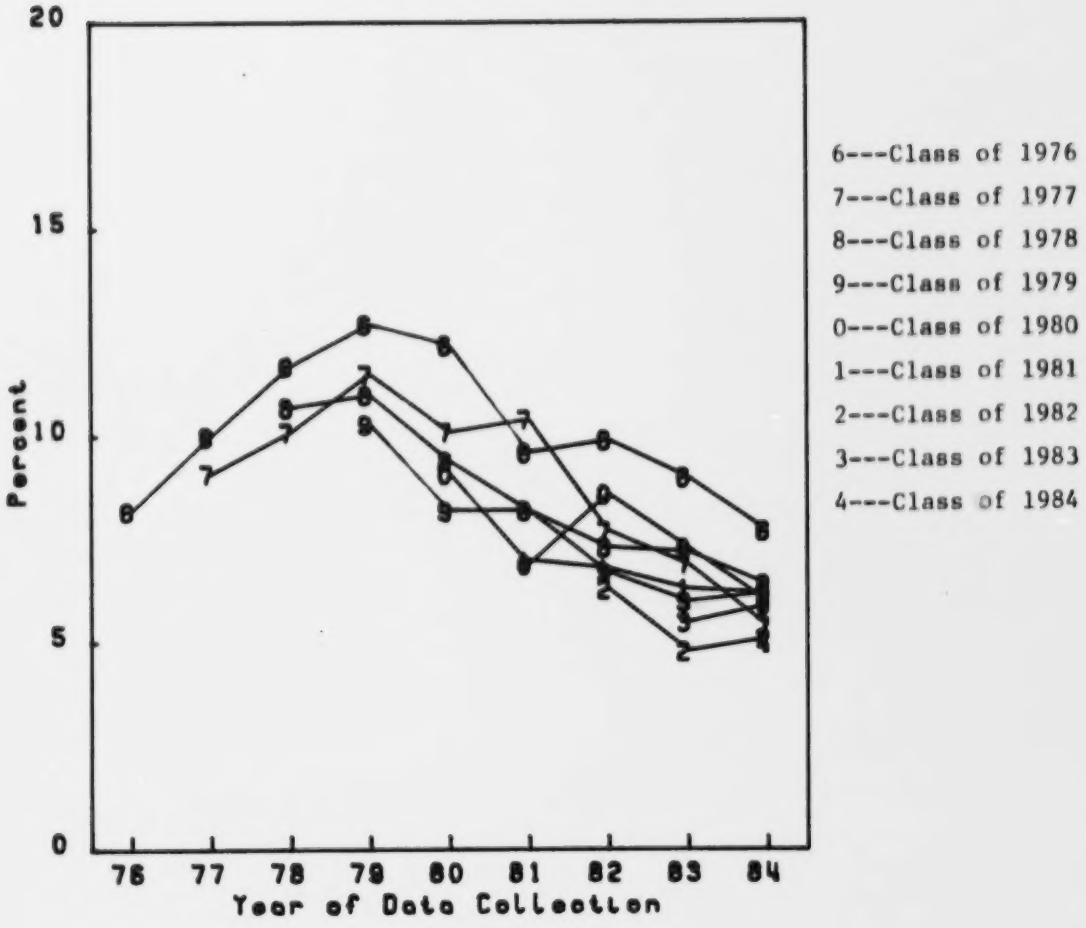
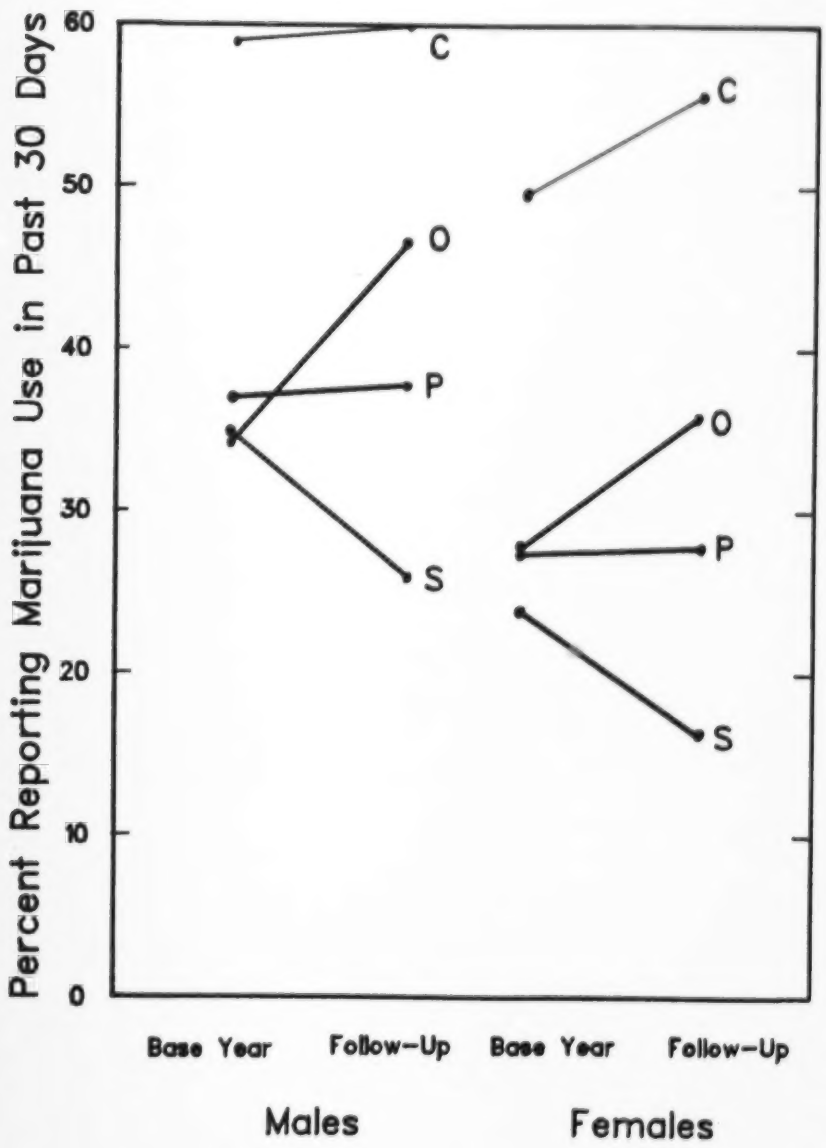


FIGURE 4

Marijuana Use Related to Living Environment:
Base-Year and Follow-Up Percentages



two, and three years beyond high school, data combined) percentages for those in four different living arrangements. (For a more extensive discussion of methods and findings, see Bachman, O'Malley, and Johnston, 1981.)

Use of alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs all are influenced by post-high school living arrangements, and the effects are closely parallel. Figure 4 presents the data for marijuana. Being married and living with a spouse appears to reduce drug use, compared with usage levels as high school seniors. (Incidentally, while the data shown in Figure 4 are percentages above a certain threshold of drug use, other analyses dealing with mean frequencies of drug use produced very similar findings. Thus we refer to increased or decreased use rather than simply changes in percentages of users.)

The smallest category in terms of post-high school living arrangements consists of those who reported living unmarried with a partner of the opposite sex. When these individuals were seniors (and in most cases still living with their parents), they were far above average in their rates of drug use; and the above average use continued after graduation. It thus appears that cohabitation experiences are rather different from marriage when it comes to impacts on drug use during the first years after high school.

Many young adults continue living with parents for a while after high school (more than half at one year beyond graduation, and more than one third at three years beyond graduation). For those in this category, use of alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs showed rather little change, on average, during the first few years after high school.

The rest of the high school graduates were grouped together as those in other living arrangements. This category includes people living alone or with others in apartments, dormitories, military bases, etc. As high school seniors their average levels of drug use were not different from their classmates who would continue living with parents or marry during the first few years after graduation. However, those who entered those "other living arrangements" after high school showed increases in their use of alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs.

In sum, our analyses of the impacts of post-high school experiences reveal that use of alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs decreases among those living with a spouse, remains largely unchanged among those living with parents, and increases among those in most other living arrangements. Post-high school educational and occupational experiences show relatively little independent impact on drug use, once their statistical association with living arrangements is taken into account.

Concluding Comments

We have summarized a number of findings here which have a bearing on the quality of life for young people currently reaching adulthood. We noted that their hopes and plans still fit rather well the "American dream" of marriage, children, and material well-being. But we have also seen some evidence of increasing concern about attaining that dream. The last few graduating classes have placed increased emphasis on job status, income, and opportunities for advancement. No doubt this is in response to the recent high levels of unemployment. For some it may also reflect an awareness of the special problems of being at the tail end of the baby boom—they may face a crowded job market for much of their lifetime.

At a more global level, the predominant view among young people is that world conditions will not improve during the next few years, and many expect matters to get

worse. In particular, concerns about the threat of nuclear war have shown a dramatic rise from the mid-seventies to the early eighties.

Our data from 1975 through 1979 might have suggested that the growing concerns mentioned above led young people to an increasing reliance on drugs; however, the last few years have actually seen a decline in their use of illicit drugs, especially marijuana. One of the reasons for the decline is another concern—a growing perception that regular use of a drug such as marijuana carries great risks of harm.

Despite such good news about very recent changes in drug use, it would be a disservice to leave the impression that the drug abuse problem among American youth is anywhere close to being solved. It is still true that: (a) Nearly two-thirds (62% in the class of 1984) have tried an illicit drug before graduation from high school. (b) At least one in every twenty seniors is smoking marijuana on a daily or near daily basis, and 16 percent have done so for at least a month at some time in their lives. (c) About one in twenty is drinking alcohol daily or near daily; and half the males and about 30 percent of the females have recently engaged in heavy drinking (five or more drinks in a row), (d) Some 29 percent have smoked cigarettes in the past month, a substantial proportion of whom are, or soon will be, daily smokers.

These remain disturbing levels of substance use and abuse among American youth, whether by historical standards or in comparison with other countries. It clearly has important implications for the quality of their lives both now and in the future.

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